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**Exploring the role of sewing as a leisure activity for those aged 40 years and under**

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## **Exploring the role of sewing as a leisure activity for those aged 40 years and under**

When sewing is subjected to critical scholarly attention it is often from a public health perspective with participants typically above the age of 40 years. Consequently, very little is known about what factors bring younger ages to, and sustain their interest in, sewing for leisure.

To gain a deeper understanding of the role of sewing this qualitative study sought to explore and foreground the experiences of people aged 40 years and under who engage in sewing for leisure. Utilising creative research methods (including photos, online written narratives, interviews and sewn items), 78 participants participated in this global study to share their sewing experiences.

The findings highlighted their reasons for sewing were multifaceted and included pride, accomplishment, the opportunities for social connections and self-awareness, as well as suggestions of sewing supporting the psychological 'flow' state. This research is an exploration of how the smaller act of engaging in sewing for leisure offers wider multi-faceted benefits that contribute to much larger topics of identity, self-esteem, communities, social interactions and enjoyment. This article offers a new insight into sewing by foregrounding the voices and experiences of those who have previously gone unheard within existing sewing research: those aged 40 years and under.

Keywords: sew; sewing; textiles; crafts; leisure; women; identity

## **Introduction:**

Typically, when leisure activities are researched, their benefits are often in relation to the preventative perspective within the public health arena (Passmore, 2003) or in relation to leisure activities acting as a 'buffer' to support coping mechanisms during difficult life events (Iwasaki, 2001).

There have been several studies exploring the benefits of crafts as leisure activities (Reynolds, 2009;) with knitting specifically having been subjected to scholarly focus including its role in activism, also known as craftivism (Kelly, 2014), its role in supporting wellbeing as a mindful process (Corkhill, 2014;), as well as its associated gendered politics (Fisk, 2012;). Sewing has not often been subjected to the same critical scholarly exploration. When sewing has been studied it is often done from a public health perspective as an activity to support those living with health conditions and/or disabilities (Reynolds, Vivat and Prior, 2008). Furthermore, in such studies, participants are typically above the age of 40 years with sewing thus being promoted as an activity in which to encourage 'healthy ageing' (Kenning, 2015).

There are growing concerns about the increase in mental health difficulties amongst the younger population within the western world (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). There is also growing recognition within the UK of the impact that art and creativity can have in positively contributing to health and wellbeing physically, socially, mentally and emotionally (All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). Whilst it is clear that leisurely, creative activities have many benefits, especially for those in later life, there remains very little research exploring whether sewing specifically, as a leisurely, creative activity, has potential for contributing to health and wellbeing amongst younger age groups.

I begin this article by providing an overview of sewing in academic literature before reporting on a study that explored the experiences of younger people in the western world who sew and the role that sewing has played, and continues to play, in their lives. By doing so, I argue that sewing is not an activity that is, nor should be, confined to the past or confined to being an activity for those who are disabled or retired; it is an activity which is meaningful for many younger people in today's age both through the process of sewing as well as through the final product produced by sewing. I thus offer a new perspective of sewing for sewing's sake with wider multi-faceted benefits that can be offered to all ages by illuminating the voices of those who have previously gone unheard within sewing research: those aged 40 years and under.

## **Defining sewing and those who engage in sewing:**

The term 'textiles' encompasses many craft practices including knitting, weaving, braiding, sewing, felting, dyeing, crocheting, spinning, and basketry (Riley, 2011). Traditionally, women engaged in textiles through necessity to provide warmth, protection and functionality (Barber, 1994). With the rise of machinery following the industrial revolution, textile production began to move away from the home and into mass-production within factories (Futerman Collier, 2011). Consequently, women's use of sewing declined as a way of rejecting the domesticity and oppression that sewing was seen to encompass for females (Turney, 2009).

More recently, there has been a resurgence in those engaging in textiles in the western world (Jefferies, 2016). Popular media suggests a growing re-emergence of those interested, and/or engaging, in sewing with a strong online

presence of textile based digital blogs and communities (Tilly and the Buttons, 2017). There could be several reasons for why people are returning to an activity which is costly both financially and timely despite living in an age when buying clothes has never been cheaper (Bain, 2016). It could be because sewing taps into nostalgic feelings of lost skills and a 'better time' or it could be because of a desire to be creative rather than solely consumers (Bain, 2016). Furthermore, there are suggestions that sewing offers a contemporary way of engaging in "crafty mindfulness" that enables us to slow down in a world which is dominated by increasing digital and media usage (Kay, 2017). Within the scholarly world, little is known about people's (and especially younger people's) motivations for engaging in sewing as a leisure activity (Bain, 2016). Despite this supposed resurgence in sewing, especially amongst younger generations, most academic literature has explored the benefits of sewing for older people and nearly always for women (appendix 1).

There are several possibilities for why sewing has commonly been explored as a leisure activity for older women. Sewing is time-intensive and, consequently, older women are more likely to have the time to engage in sewing as they have spent the years focussing on their (now grown up) family's needs and/or careers (Stalp, 2007). When sewing has been explored as a leisure activity it typically focusses on the benefits for older people as a low-cost, non-pharmaceutical and non-clinical approach, to promote independent self-management of subjective, positive well-being for healthy ageing (Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell, 2001). I question, however, why the promotion of independent, self-management of subjective well-being through sewing is only deemed as 'needed' for the older generation given growing concerns about the rise of mental health difficulties amongst younger generations especially within the western world (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). Fisher (1995) suggests there are five key features to successful ageing: social interaction, self-acceptance, feeling purposeful, autonomy, and personal development which were also explored by Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell (2001) in relation to textile handcraft guild participation. Rather than viewing these key features as beneficial for successful ageing, however, this paper suggests that these key features are beneficial for all ages and are, in fact, being experienced by the younger age range through their sewing experiences.

Thus, whilst most scholars on sewing generally acknowledge the benefits, and multifaceted role, of engaging in textile and creative activities for wellbeing, mental health, social connections, self-esteem it seems that in doing so, very little acknowledgement has been given to the experiences of younger people who sew not as an intervention but as a creative outlet and an everyday leisure activity. This paper is not proposing that sewing offers benefits that are unique to younger age groups but rather that the benefits that have already been identified and established for people post-retirement are just as relevant and prevalent for those aged 40 years and under who engage in sewing as a leisure activity.

### **Methodology:**

The qualitative study informing this paper was grounded within an interpretive paradigm that recognises the diversity and complexity within, and between, individual's subjective realities and experiences. The social world we inhabit is complex, multifaceted and multi-layered. As such, the use of objective and

quantitative methodological approaches (such as those favoured within the normative paradigm) would not be beneficial for gaining an in-depth insight into the experiences of younger people who sew. Furthermore, it would not do justice to the uniqueness, complexities, and diversity within and between their experiences (Brinkman, 2012). In order to illuminate their experiences, understandings and interpretations this research is built upon an acceptance that the participants' reasons and experiences will be individual and diverse (Brinkman, 2012).

### ***Sampling:***

There is no 'central hub' of all people aged 40 years and under who engage in sewing as a leisure activity from which I could employ randomized sampling. Consequently, such a sampling approach would have been inappropriate for this research (Babbie, 2007). Furthermore, I was not seeking to claim any wider generalisability or representation except that of those people, at that time and in that context (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). As such, a non-probability sampling approach was adopted.

There were two strands to my research: an online strand and an interview strand. For the online strand of the research, I began with purposive sampling by sharing a post on my own blog (<https://startingstitch.wordpress.com/2017/06/02/what-does-sewing-mean-to-you/>) explaining that I was looking for people aged 40 years and under who engage in sewing to participate in a study about their sewing experiences. I also contacted the administrators (as gatekeepers) of a number of Facebook groups who formed sewing 'communities' to explain the research and ask if I could share the blog post within their group: 37 groups agreed, five said no, and two did not reply. My sample may thus be biased towards those who have internet and technology access (Beddows, 2008). This online aspect unexpectedly encompassed snowball sampling as the blog post began to be shared amongst people. Whilst this highlights ethical considerations (as I have no control over how the blog post was shared or explained) it was beyond my control to have prevented it being shared so rapidly. I had not aimed for snowball sampling yet the approach was beneficial for acknowledging participants' insider, expert knowledge and including participants who may not have been accessed through my earlier sampling/access approach (Shaw and Holland, 2014).

For the interviews, I began with convenience sampling by contacting two people under the age of 40 years who I knew engaged in sewing as a leisure activity. Again, this turned into snowball sampling as both participants recommended the research to a friend (who was unknown to me) who then contacted me to find out more about participating.

My final sample included 73 online participants and 5 interview participants. All the participants were female, geographically dispersed, and ranged from 18 to 40 years of age (appendix 2).

### ***Methods:***

Participant-chosen, visual-led, data production was employed for the online strand of the research (Mannay, 2010). I invited participants to choose a photo which represented a piece of sewing which was meaningful to them and use this to guide their written narrative about the role sewing plays in their life, why

that sewing/textiles piece was important to them, and what they enjoy about sewing. Inviting participants to share a written account about sewing enabled participants to craft, and share, their narrative at a time and place that was convenient to them (Shaw and Holland, 2014). Inviting participants to share photos of an object they have sewn situates the participant as an expert on their sewing and sewing experiences; they have the control over the selection, framing, composition, and objects within the photo (Rose, 2016). Photos and textiles can help to evoke information, memories and feelings as well as act as stimuli for reflection and explanation in a way that interviews alone would be unable to do so (Harper, 2002). The visual object, the textile photo, can then almost act as a 'third object' upon which the participant can focus on to formulate their narratives in a way that is meaningful and safe for them (Clark and Morriss, 2017).

Based upon my literature reading I formed an interview schedule to allow key themes to be explored with participants. I sent this interview schedule to interview participants in advance so that they could feel prepared. The questions within the interview schedule acted as prompts rather than a structured guide with the participants covering the topics in the order which was meaningful and relevant to them (Stalp, 2007). I began each interview by inviting participants to make a timeline from birth to present and asked them when they first began to sew (see for example figures 1 and 2).

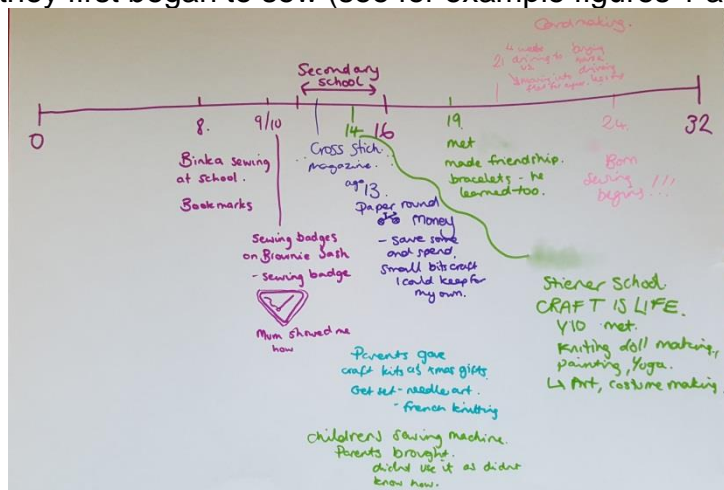


Figure 1. Tara's timeline part 1.

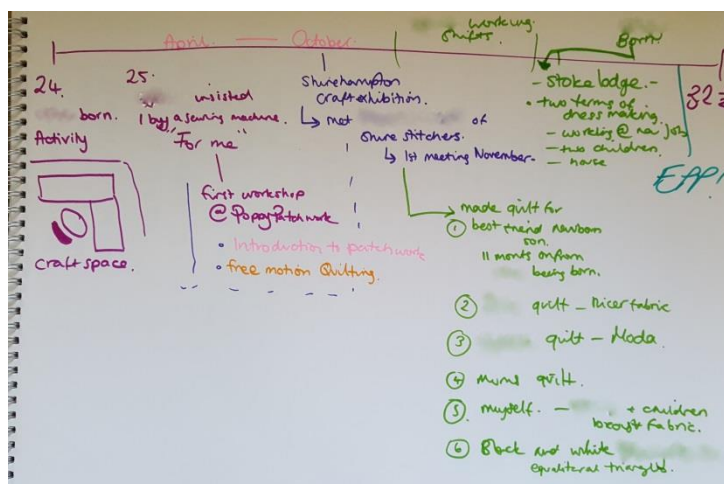


Figure 2. Tara's timeline part 2.

### ***Analysis and dissemination:***

Of the 73 online narrative and photo participants, I sent a summary of their narrative within a month of their contact for participant validation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The sewing visual image was used as a medium for participants to share their subjective reality in both of the research strands. The images themselves were not subjected to critical visual analysis in their own right; thematic analysis was employed to ascertain and analyse patterns within the written and recorded data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding thematically enabled me to, inductively and deductively, identify key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is these themes (*feelings of pride and accomplishment, calmness, social interactions, self-awareness, and flow*) which will be presented to offer new insights into the multifaceted role of sewing for those whose voices have previously gone unheard: those aged 40 years and under.

### **Findings:**

#### ***Feelings of pride and accomplishment:***

Across the data it was clear that the majority of participants (57 of the 78) felt pride in their sewing. The reasons for pride were varied and included mastering specific sewing techniques, seeing the recipient's joy at the sewing gift made for them, finishing a sewing item, and having a tangible object to show for their time and energy.

Nineteen of the 57 said that their pride came from mastering specific sewing techniques. This is not to say that sewing easily provided pride and accomplishment. Rather that, despite the challenges sewing entailed, it provided them with a greater sense of accomplishment as they felt they had worked harder for it, *"I love the challenge of pushing what I am capable of and the feeling of achievement I have when I am satisfied with the result"* (Sophie, 33, UK).

Being open to mistakes is a key feature in learning, being resilient and creative irrespective of age (Robinson, 2011). For 14 of the 57, their openness to mistakes whilst sewing played a part in both their creativity and learning. As such, the 14 participants spoke of their sewing mistakes as frustrating but not disheartening as they ultimately contributed to their sewing ability:

*Sometimes I find sewing really frustrating, when I can't translate my vision into a final product, when I can't get my head round an instruction, don't get the fit right, or make a mistake. But usually these can eventually be seen as learning curves!* (Violet, 29, UK).

For 19 of the 57 participants, they felt pride when they saw the recipient's joy at the gift they had sewn for them: *"The reaction that you get when you give something that has been made with love and time has gone into it makes it so worth while"* (Phoebe, 35, UK).





Figure 3. A cushion Phoebe made for her mother-in-law who had been admitted to hospital and was having trouble sleeping. Phoebe made this cushion with lavender inside to help relax and comfort her.

Reynolds and Prior (2006) suggest that when art is used as a hobby it can encourage confidence and social connectedness. This seemed to hold true for my participants as sewing encouraged pride in their makes as well as social connections when gifting the item to someone. This act of gift-giving can, in turn, contribute to a sense of pride and accomplishment thus establishing a cyclical positive effect.

There also seems to be something about external validation playing a role in feeling pride and accomplishment. Fifteen of the 57 spoke of external validation for their sewing promoting feelings of accomplishment. This external validation could come through sharing images on social media but also through face-to-face interactions. The latter was evident in Leah's photo and narrative: *"When your guests tell you how beautiful and original your invites are and even one to say she was going to get it framed as it was just so lovely to box away made me feel amazing!"* (Leah, 29, UK).



Figure 4. Leah's hand-sewn wedding invites, order of service and name places.

Finishing an item seemed to play an important role in feelings of pride and accomplishment and was referred to specifically by 31 of the 57: *"The whole thing just makes me feel good about myself, I can sit and think, 'I made that' and that's a great feeling"* (Natalie, 27, UK).



Figure 5. Leggings that Natalie sewed for her friend's baby.

Eight of the 57 participants in my study spoke of their pride and accomplishment being strengthened by having a tangible, sewn object to show for their abilities, efforts and achievements which in turn acted as a tangible representation of their identity and worth: *“Being able to see tangible products from each of my days was a powerful reminder that I wasn’t as lost as I felt at that time”* (Paula, 35, Australia).



Figure 6. Paula's quilt.

Whilst tangibility was not a theme referred to by a large number of participants within my study, it is a theme that echoes similar findings within existing studies with older participants (Reynolds, 1997, 2000). Burt and Atkinson (2012) suggest that sewing and quilting are accessible formats in which people, without an arts background, can still be creative through using their hands and producing a tangible product to show for their time and effort.

It seems that despite the varying reasons for how sewing promotes feelings of accomplishment and pride, the key factor is that these positive feelings do occur when sewing. Accomplishment, pride, mastery and self-

esteem are key elements of becoming a resourceful and resilient being for all ages (Howe, 2009).

### **Calmness**

Fifty-one of the 78 participants in my study spoke of sewing as calming. Generally, the participants rarely expanded on the specifics of why sewing was calming and this may be, in part, due to the research methods adopted; the online narrative and sewing photo did not allow room for prompting. When participants did make reference to the calming qualities of sewing, they included: the fact that sewing is not demanding, the repetitive hand motion, and the opportunities for 'down-time'. Leisure plays an important role in coping with stress through providing 'time out' (even if only temporarily) from daily challenges, as well as rejuvenation. Leisure activities, which support stress management, can help individuals to find a better balance in life and, in turn, feel rejuvenated when returning to the difficulties of everyday living (Iwasaki, MacTavish and MacKay, 2005). Activities encompassing simple, repetitive, enjoyable, actions are more likely to act as restful and renewing occupations and such activities are often used with children and young people experiencing attachment difficulties who are in 'fight, flight or freeze' mode (Bombèr, 2007, 2011).

Five of the 51 participants felt that the calming nature of sewing came from the low demands that sewing placed on them as an individual. Sewing offered a controllable, manageable activity in which they could engage in for short periods of time, with minimal energy required, which in turn supported feelings of calmness: *"It doesn't ask you for anything, it doesn't want anything, it's upfront, you know what you're getting before you start and, as long as you put a bit of effort in, then you can achieve anything"* (Kathy, 36, UK).



Figure 7. Kathy's cross-stitch.

Thirteen of the 51 in my study spoke of the simple, repetitive, rhythmic motion of hand sewing specifically providing them with a sense of calm: *"its the action of making and the form it makes while sewing which calms me. The rhythmic movement of my hands"* (Aisha, 24, United Arab Emirates).

We learn about ourselves and our needs through reflection and it is important to equip individuals with tools to self-soothe and self-regulate so as to learn how to maintain a state of calm (Bombèr 2007, 2011). This echoes



similar findings to Howell and Pierce (2000) with their assertion of the important of simple repetitive movements providing respite and relaxation. The opportunities that sewing provides for self-soothing and regulation were evident in the responses from 11 of the 51 in my study. For Lindsey, the slow, repetitive movement of hand-stitching was both calming as well as providing opportunities for reflection. Upon returning home to the USA after her missionary work in Malawi, Lindsey drew from the calming qualities of hand-stitching to work through her difficulties with transitioning back to (the often fast-paced) modern living in the USA:

*I had just started working again in the US and every night I would come home and pick up my sunflowers and stitch. It was amazing how noticeably the tension would release and the strain would lessen. I did what I knew; I picked up my needle and thread. Stitch after stitch, piece after piece, I felt the stresses and strains, grief and tears slowly melt away. Stitch by stitch, I felt some mending in my heart as I grieved the loss of a life and place that had been so formative for me (Lindsey, 31, USA).*



Figure 8. Lindsey's quilt.



Figure 9. close up of Lindsey's quilt.

We are surrounded by a fast-paced world that makes ‘switching off’ or ‘slowing down’ incredibly difficult. We live in a world where we are told to keep busy as this will increase our productivity; ‘down-time’ through relaxation and creativity is trivialised as not a productive use of time (Robinson, 2011). For 18 of the 51 participants, sewing provided calm precisely because it enabled them to take time out for themselves: *“A couple of times I have gone by myself to a café recently with the sole intention of having ‘me time’ by having a coffee and some simple sewing to do as I sit and watch the world go by”* (Tara, 32, UK).



Figure 10. Tara's sewing whilst in a café.

Despite the importance of down-time and sewing's suggested relaxing qualities, four of the 51 participants spoke of feeling that they have to ‘earn’ their sewing time:

*I pick up my sewing when I can fit it in with other commitments and as a leisure activity it falls down the list. I need to clear my head of other jobs before I can feel guilt free about sitting down to sew. Sewing is an indulgent luxury for me* (Kayleigh, 40, UK).

This resonates with similar claims from women in earlier studies of feeling that they needed to ‘earn’ their sewing (Stalp, 2006, 2007). Leisure activities cannot, and should not, be viewed in isolation; they are touched by every experience socially, economically, politically, financially and geographically (Langhamer, 2009). As such, this guilt that some women feel when taking time for themselves, could be, in part, due to societal images of ‘good mothers’, ‘good wives’, and ‘good women’, being those who self-sacrifice (Langhamer, 2009). Given the high levels of stress and mental health difficulties within the younger population in western society there is a need for leisure activities which provide calmness, self-soothing and rejuvenation (Iwasaki, MacTavish and MacKay, 2005). As such, activities which promote self-soothing should not have to be ‘earned’ but should be seen as a crucial tool in one's toolkit for self-regulation, relaxation and self-soothing (Corkhill, 2014).

### **Social interactions:**

Another key theme within the data was the opportunities that sewing provided younger people with for social interactions. Thirty-six of the 78 people in my study mentioned social connections through, or as a result of, sewing as a leisure activity. Social engagement is an important factor in positive health and wellbeing in all ages yet many studies focus on the importance of social engagement post retirement for remaining mentally active and socially engaged

with lower chances of developing dementia (Frankish and Horton, 2017). More widely, the importance of companionship, social interaction and a sense of belonging should not be underestimated as these ultimately contribute to a stronger sense of self (Walton *et al.*, 2012). It is important to support individuals to feel a sense of belonging and social connectedness (Leach, 2015). In turn this can support their ability to form meaningful connections with themselves, as well as the wider community (Leach, 2015). Similarly to Kenning (2015), the connection that the participants in my study spoke of often went deeper than the actual physical act of sewing; they spoke of a sense of 'belonging' to a community of people with shared interests and experiences, connecting through sewing alongside one another, connections through tangible, sewn objects of care, and also belonging to, and feeling connected with, a larger part of women's historical involvement in crafts. Furthermore, these connections came in a range of forms from sewing alongside one another in local quilt groups and larger quilt retreats, through to connecting with like-minded individuals by utilising social media and the internet.

Seventeen of the 36 participants spoke of the benefits of forming, and developing, connections with others on the basis of shared interests:

*I go on quilt retreats with my group and we go on weekends away and they know about my life I know about all of their lives, their children, etc and I think having that support for them to say "I saw your quilt at the festival it was amazing" that is more than anyone giving me a 'like' on Facebook (Jill, 28, UK).*



Figure 11. Jill's 'extravaganza' quilt made for an exhibition.

Belonging to a group with shared interests can promote social interactions, shared learning, a sense of belonging, reaffirmation of your place in society, support networks, humour, fun, and social capital (Riley, Corkhill and



Morris, 2013). The social interaction sewing offers is not a new claim; through Long's (2016) examination of diaries from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women recorded their enjoyment of the social environment around the quilting frame (where women would gather around and work together on a quilt, similar to the iconic quilting bees in America).

Sewing is an activity which is not dependent on age, career, sex, gender, ethnicity, religion or culture (although it can be influenced by these if so desired). It is an activity which holds great potential for social connections and empowerment (Maidment and Macfarlane, 2009). It is a 'leveller' which minimises hierarchical differences. One participant spoke of using sewing as a connective activity during her work as a teacher in a secondary school/6<sup>th</sup> form:

*Sometimes in work I am faced with highly stressful situations, difficult or challenging and vulnerable students for example, and sewing can either be a connection between us- working on something together, having a shared goal, enjoying doing something, or teaching them a skill. I try to focus on process and not outcome with them (Rosanne, 37, UK).*



Figure 12. The hexagons Rosanne and her pupil sewed together.

Even if participants sewed alone they felt that giving the item to someone strengthened the connection between the maker and the recipient. 21 of the 36 participants spoke of feeling connected with someone through making a sewn item for them:

*I absolutely feel a connection to everything I make for my daughter...there is a deep satisfaction in creating something knowing that it has a recipient. The owl [made for her daughter] was the first thing I made with the intention of bringing joy...I'm looking forward to future years where my daughter will truly feel the joy from items I make and will even be able to 'demand' specific makes (Samantha, 33, UK).*



Figure 13. The owl Samantha sewed for her daughter.

Sometimes, it was the actual form of the sewing item that enabled the person sewing to develop, or sustain, connections with those they cared for:

*I got a scary fear of death so I made a quilt for our daughter for the just incase moment I'm no longer around to wrap my arms around her, to give her a hug when she was down and to keep her warm at night, I needed to know that for what ever reason I'm not here anymore that she will always have a part of me to hold close (Kirsten, 26, UK).*



Figure 14. Kirsten's quilt made for her daughter.

For others, the social connections were strengthened through the meanings that they had sewn into the object to tangibly demonstrate their love and care which acted almost as if it were a lasting legacy:

*Then when I had my first child I wanted to create things for her to treasure. So I started to make her Christmas stocking...it felt like if anything ever happened to me she would have something that showed how much I love her (Rachel, 37, UK)*



Figure 15. The Christmas stocking Rachel sewed for her daughter.

These excerpts also seem to echo some of the tenets of permanency and constancy; a key aspect of child development (Boyd and Bee, 2014). A child needs to experience being held in mind by someone (often their primary caregiver) to negotiate the developmental stages. This includes the realisation that their parent (or caregiver) continues to exist even when they are not directly connected, and that the child as an individual continues to exist despite not being directly connected to the parent/caregiver (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). For



some of the participants, it seems that sewing enabled them to develop and build upon these two key developmental stages, without necessarily realizing they were doing so:

*This coat means shelter, love and protection for my daughter, especially when she's away from me at daycare. It's wonderful that I can create something that will keep her warm and protected when I'm not around. this coat was made with a lot of love, care and thought (Becca, 30, Australia)*



Figure 16. The raincoat Becca sewed for her daughter.

Nine of the 36 participants spoke of feeling connected with the women before them (both in their family and those they did not know) who engaged in sewing: *"It connects me to the women of previous generations of my family, many of whom were accomplished at sewing or other needlework. It connects me to other women who are also passionate about this skilled craft"* (Tierney, 39, Canada).

Historically, many women were confined to domestic needlework during the eighteenth-century due to male and societal expectations and constraints (Long, 2016). Consequently, sewing is not without critics as it has long been viewed as a 'feminine' activity which subjugates women and is thus given little credit due to the traditional, domestic craft, typology (Hollows, 2008). Parker (1984) argues that we should be wary of confining needlework to these feminist concerns. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the pleasure women traditionally encountered through learning sewing as a child which then enabled them to have mastery over such skills as adults and thus be able to converse whilst sewing with others around them. Therefore, rather than seeing sewing as a regressive pre-feminist activity, sewing can support feminism as it encompasses several feminist aims including community building, empowerment and social justice (Pentney, 2008). Far from conforming to gendered stereotypical subjugation of women's leisurely pursuits, for the

participants in my study, their sewing was influenced by the connection it enabled them to feel with women of previous generations.

**Self-awareness:**

Twenty-four of the 78 participants spoke of sewing as an important activity in connecting with themselves for two reasons: reclaiming their identity as an individual and through developing their own style with clothes that rejected societal pressures.

For 12 of the 24, they developed self-connection and positive regard for oneself through engaging in an activity which was based on their interests rather than being reliant on their identity as a wife, mother, employee, or employer: *“It's my only time that I get to do something that is just for me, it's time to be alone and do something that I enjoy”* (Camille, 25, Australia).

Through engaging in a hobby which focusses on strengths and abilities rather than disabilities, individuals are able to gain a stronger sense of their own capacities:

*I started to sew in order to help me cope with the physical and psychological effects of my medical conditions, and was really ill at the time I made this dress. However, since then I've only worn it on days where I've been able to go out without my wheelchair, and I have come to associate it with some of the most exciting times of the past year, which is so great because of how special I thought the fabric was in the first place! Dressmaking has continued to help me to cope with my disabilities, and has become so special to me* (Hayley, 18, UK).



Figure 17. Hayley in the dress she made for herself.

Thirteen of the 24 participants from my study spoke of sewing empowering them to create clothes that enabled them to dress in a way they were comfortable in:

*Another important aspect of sewing for me is self-knowledge, self-acceptance, self-care, and self-love. As I've learned about making clothes to fit properly, I've come to be very familiar with my body shape, and it's normalized my body to me. Yes, it's outside the average. All bodies are outside the norm one way or another. I have learned how to adjust patterns so that they fit the body I have and make it look and feel*

*good. The self-loathing I used to feel when I went shopping and couldn't find anything to fit, has been replaced by equanimity. So those jeans look awful. That's not a problem with me, it's a problem with the jeans because the manufacturer didn't have my body in mind when they created them - and why would they, they've never met me (Tierney, 39, Canada).*



Figure 18. Top and trousers that Tierney made for herself.

For these 13 women, sewing was an activity which enabled them to feel empowered through dressing for their body in a design, fit, fabric, and color that they liked:

*As a larger lady to find the right outfit for special occasions can be really hard and soul destroying at times. By being able to sew I can make an outfit to how I want it to be and fit me perfectly (Phoebe, 35, UK).*

### **Flow:**

Several studies have suggested links between sewing (and creative activities more generally) and entering into 'flow' (Pöllänen, 2015). 'Flow' is a mindset strongly correlated with positive psychology (Csikszentmihayli, 1992). Regulating one's self-awareness and attention is a skill that is underappreciated but one which is invaluable within the social work arena for promoting resilience and thus rooted within a strengths-based perspective (Howe, 2009). There are also some suggestions that developing a greater self-awareness through flow experiences could promote higher levels of self-esteem as well as promoting an activity which focuses one's mind and body in a positive manner (Rebeiro and Polgar, 1999).

'Flow' is a psychological state whereby the person intensely concentrates on, and is fully immersed within, the task or activity at hand. A 'flow' activity is intrinsically motivating and rewarding irrespective of the finished product

(Csikszentmihayli, 1992). Twenty-one of the 79 participants spoke of the *process* of sewing being immersive and intrinsically rewarding in itself: *"I'm fascinated by colour and texture and like my pieces to evolve rather than planning them in detail. I find choosing fabrics and threads as therapeutic as the stitching itself"* (Catherine, 39, UK).



Figure 19. Catherine's textile art which hangs in her daughter's room.

'Flow' activities also maintain interest as the person is both stimulated by the activity as well as interested in furthering their skills in relation to that activity. There is a need to find the balance between just enough challenge to maintain interest and not so challenging that it feels overwhelming and thus fearful (Csikszentmihayli, 1992, 1997). When this balance is found, so that the person is suitably challenged but also highly interested and invested in the activity, the person is more able to block out environmental distractions and everyday stresses and anxieties. Sixteen of the 79 participants spoke of sewing being challenging enough to block out everyday stresses, whilst not being so challenging that they felt unable to engage in it:

*It was something that really helped to distract me from the (at times excruciating) pain and kept boredom at bay. Stitching became a zen place for me, keeping me calm and helping me to tire my brain out so I could sleep a little longer at night* (Kirsty, 31, UK).

Furthermore, during 'flow', the person is present in that moment and thus less likely to feel fragmented by various thoughts, distractions and preoccupations. Consequently, when in 'flow', one is more likely to feel in control, autonomous and also accomplished (Csikszentmihayli, 1992). Seven of the 79 participants in my study spoke of sewing enabling them to experience autonomy and control: *"I found it was a great way to distract myself from my surrounding problems and focus on something that I had complete control over (when all else was uncontrollable). It was very relaxing and beneficial"* (Shona, 36, Australia).





Figure 20. A quilt Shona made for her Mum. Shona's Mum had been in a car accident with critical injuries and Shona made this quilt in her Mum's favourite colors to keep her Mum warm whilst she was in hospital.

These psychological states are positive for preventing the mind from wandering to, or ruminating on, negative or darker thoughts. Typically, when people associate an activity with the 'flow' state, they are more likely to approach that activity with feelings of control and confidence rather than trepidation: *"It also gives me a sense of control and achievement as although my life has not turned out how I would've chosen, as long as I follow the correct process/pattern I can create something"* (Vanessa, 33, UK).



Figure 21. Vanessa's embroidered cushion sewn whilst on honeymoon.

Perceptions of time can be altered during 'flow' activities due to the feelings of encompassment by the activity they are engaged in (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Ten of the 79 participants in my study spoke of altered perceptions of time when sewing. This was often in relation to becoming absorbed in the activity with a restful focus which meant there was no room for intrusive thoughts or for their mind to ruminate on preoccupations:

*I can lose endless amounts of time in the sewing room, emerging rather calmer than when I went in. I spent a ridiculously rainy evening sorting my scraps by colour, and found myself half asleep at my sewing machine at 3am having pieced all of the green scraps into over 100 five inch squares. I loved the squares but they needed some sort of highlight, so in the morning I added the red flashes. I got absorbed again, and by the time I went to bed that night the whole thing was finished and bound. Though I hadn't consciously been trying to relax, I felt much less overwhelmed by what was going on in the rest of my life. To me, the regular flashes of red in the mishmash of green scraps say that no matter how chaotic life feels, there are constants - my family, friends, work, literature, and the need to make things. And the quilt as a whole reminds me that sewing is a great way to get my brain off of the hamster wheel! (Nicola, 37, UK).*



Figure 22. Nicola's quilt.



## **Conclusions:**

We must be wary of romanticising women and sewing as it has been both cheapened and celebrated; it has been a tool for oppression and subjugation as well as a tool for freedom and autonomy; it has been a career and a leisure activity; it has been a necessity for those of a lower socio-economic status as well as an extravagance for those of a higher socio-economic status who could afford the time to engage in leisure activities. Needlework, textiles and women thus have a complex and multifaceted relationship and it is clear that the needle and cloth has pierced and pieced, not just our society, but humanity as a whole both economically, politically, socially and culturally. It is thus an extremely valuable tool in exploring human history and activities (Goggin, 2009).

In this paper I have argued that whilst existing literature acknowledges the multi-faceted role of sewing and textiles, in doing so, the voices of those aged 40 years and under have frequently gone unheard. Secondly, I have presented a study which sought to rectify this clear gap in existing knowledge by specifically exploring the experiences of those aged 40 years and under who engage in sewing as a leisure activity. Leisure activities are beneficial for social and emotional wellbeing through offering opportunities for respite and relaxation (Iwasaki, MacTavish and MacKay, 2005). In turn, leisure activities that are restful and renewing, will equip individuals to develop resources that can help them to cope in times of stress (Corkhill, 2014).

The 78 participants in my study expressed varying reasons for engaging in sewing as a leisure activity. These reasons were often multifaceted and multi-layered encompassing the simple enjoyment of creating with textiles, the opportunity for personal growth, the challenge of learning new skills, the accomplishment of finishing pieces, the accomplishment of mastering skills, the pride in accomplishing techniques, the social connections through shared interests, the social connections through gifting sewn items, and developing a stronger sense of self. The reasons provided by my participants for their engagement in sewing were similar despite being so geographically dispersed. Furthermore, their responses echoed similar responses within existing studies with older participants for why people engage in sewing thus demonstrating that the benefits of sewing are not age dependent. Continuing to view the benefits of sewing in relation to public health agendas and healthy ageing, whilst undoubtedly true, could also continue to perpetuate the stereotypical image of those who engage in sewing as 'older' generation thus leaving those who are younger and engage in sewing feeling alienated, unheard or abnormal. In doing so, I hope to lay a groundwork for adopting a wider lens when exploring sewing, the benefits, and people's reasons for engaging and maintaining their interest in sewing. Essentially, I am not arguing that we should give up a public policy approach which supports creative textile interventions or engaging in textile activities for healthy ageing. Instead, I am suggesting a more open approach to understanding the multifaceted role of sewing in and of itself for all ages.

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**Appendix 1: Summary of demographics for those who sew in existing research**

Study:	Number of participants:	Age of participants:	Most common age(s) of participants:	Sex of participants:
Reynolds (1997)	35	18-87 years	49.3 years	female
Reynolds (2000)	39	18-70 years	a majority were between 30 and 49 years	female
Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell (2001)	30	20-86 years	59.6 years	female
Reynolds (2002)	35	29-75 years	a majority were in their 50s and 60s	female
Johnson and Wilson (2005)	39	19-84 years	53.1 years	female
Stalp (2006)	70	20-90+ years	a majority were late 40s-60s	female
Riley (2008)	21	middle to older aged (only information provided)		19 female, 2 male
Dickie (2011)	18	35-86 years	a majority were in their 40s and 50s	female
Futterman Collier (2011)	821	18-65+ years	65% were 45-64 years	female
Burt and Atkinson (2012)	29	under 40 years-80 years	14 of the 29 were 61-70 years (by comparison, 2 of the 29 were under 40 years)	female
Pöllänen (2015)	59	19-84 years	70% were 40-70 years	female

## **Appendix 2: Sample demographics**

<b>Name/pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country they are currently living in</b>	<b>Online narrative and sewing photo (ONSP) or Interview (I)</b>
Hayley	18	UK	ONSP
Daisy	23	USA	ONSP
Ayla	24	Turkey	ONSP
Aisha	24	United Arab Emirates	ONSP
Martha	24	UK	ONSP
Camille	25	Australia	ONSP
Louisa	26	Italy	ONSP
Kirsten	26	UK	ONSP
Emily	26	UK	ONSP
Jasmin	26	UK	ONSP
Lucy	26	UK	ONSP
Ingrid	27	Holland	ONSP
Laura	27	UK	ONSP
Natalie	27	UK	ONSP
Kathryn	27	UK	ONSP
Jill	28	UK	I
Leah	29	UK	ONSP
Marie	29	UK	ONSP
Ruth	29	UK	ONSP
Violet	29	UK	ONSP
Kelly	29	USA	ONSP
Becca	30	Australia	ONSP
Kimberley	30	UK	ONSP
Lynne	30	UK	ONSP
Hannah	30	UK	ONSP
Verity	30	UK	ONSP
Suzanne	30	UK	ONSP
Lara	30	USA	ONSP
Charlotte	31	UK	ONSP
Kirsty	31	UK	ONSP
Lindsey	31	USA	ONSP
Susan	32	UK	ONSP
Evie	32	UK	ONSP
Holly	32	UK	ONSP
Tammy	32	UK	ONSP
Danielle	32	UK	I
Tara	32	UK	I
Rebecca	32	USA	ONSP
Annabel	33	Australia	ONSP
Laila	33	Chile	ONSP
Samantha	33	UK	ONSP

Sophie	33	UK	ONSP
Amy	33	UK	ONSP
Vanessa	33	UK	ONSP
Katie	34	UK	ONSP
Carrie	34	UK	ONSP
Penny	34	UK	ONSP
Grace	34	UK	I
Paula	35	Australia	ONSP
Carol	35	UK	I
Phoebe	35	UK	ONSP
Lily	35	UK	ONSP
Macy	35	USA	ONSP
Shona	36	Australia	ONSP
Kathy	36	UK	ONSP
Paige	36	USA	ONSP
Kara	36	USA	ONSP
Rosanne	37	UK	ONSP
Claire	37	UK	ONSP
Rachel	37	UK	ONSP
Nicola	37	UK	ONSP
Caitlin	37	UK	ONSP
Nadia	38	UK	ONSP
Cara	38	UK	ONSP
Joanna	38	UK	ONSP
Steph	38	UK	ONSP
Scarlett	38	UK	ONSP
Tierney	39	Canada	ONSP
Libby	39	Germany	ONSP
Cassie	39	New Zealand	ONSP
Catherine	39	UK	ONSP
Kacey	39	UK	ONSP
Maggie	39	UK	ONSP
Lacy	39	USA	ONSP
Chloe	40	UK	ONSP
Gemma	40	UK	ONSP
Kayleigh	40	UK	ONSP
Megan	40	UK	ONSP



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